

Commentary on Samuel Scheffler, “The Normativity of Tradition”

If we come to the topic of the normativity of tradition fresh from the latest skirmishes in our “culture wars,” it’s easy to be tempted by just the sort of reductive dilemma Scheffler describes. In the public *conflict* between traditional and progressive claims, the real contest seems to be simply between the underlying values or principles. Traditional positions will have normative force against progressive claims only to the extent that their underlying values capture something missed by rival progressive values, in which case *that* will be the reason for favoring the traditional claims; and if the traditional values don’t win out, and are in fact ultimately dubious, then the mere appeal to *tradition* in itself seems normatively empty.

For example, if conservative evaluative claims about homosexuality are just false, then appeals to long traditions of discriminating against gays seem to carry no normative weight at all in public debate. There’s no normative force in favor of banning gay marriage or adoption stemming from the mere fact that they’ve traditionally been banned; so people who have no interest in adhering to these aspects of our traditions cannot be expected to give weight to such claims. Again, in debates of this kind, it seems to be the underlying values or principles that matter, not traditions themselves, and so as I say, if we approach the topic from this angle, it may be tempting to dismiss the idea of the normativity of tradition altogether.

Scheffler offers compelling arguments, however, for resisting this last move. His claim is that there is a sense in which traditions *can* after all be normative *for their own adherents*, providing reasons for them to do things that are called for by the tradition, where these reasons are not merely reducible to the reasons provided to just anyone by the values or principles to which the tradition appeals. I think he’s clearly right about this, and his exploration of how and why traditions can provide such reasons is rich and illuminating.

One important point I want to bring out and highlight is that the reasons of tradition that Scheffler identifies are not just *irreducible* to the reasons provided by the underlying values, but they often don't even depend on the reality of these other reasons. Consider a religion with a rich set of rituals, practices and forms of social organization all predicated on honoring and appeasing a god that, it turns out, does not exist. Such a tradition will still provide its adherents the *benefits* of convention, habit, guidance, loyalty, integrity, domestication of time, enhanced perception of the significance of their lives, and so on. These benefits are real, despite the fact that the *primary reasons* adherents take themselves to have for their actions are illusory.

There is not, for example, really a reason to perform a certain ritual sacrifice, based on the value of honoring and appeasing the god, since there is no such god, and so no such value in appeasing it. Yet despite the absence of such primary reasons behind adherents' actions, the benefits of the tradition may be robust, and these benefits may thus ground a set of *secondary* reasons that are quite real. For one thing, they may ground (defeasible) reasons for outsiders not to expose the illusion, especially if we have nothing with which to replace the benefits that might be lost if the tradition is undermined. And of course from the perspective of the adherents, these benefits ground precisely the sorts of traditional reasons Scheffler describes.

Typically, from the perspective of the adherents, these benefits and associated reasons are indeed secondary and may not even be explicitly acknowledged, as Scheffler notes. The adherents' emphasis will instead be on the primary reasons they take themselves to have, based on the values espoused by their tradition—such as honoring their god. But again, the point I want to emphasize is that they may often be wrong about these values and the primary reasons they ground, and yet still enjoy the benefits of adhering to the tradition; and these benefits do often provide genuine reasons for adhering, despite the falsity of the primary reasons. Of course, it gets

more complicated if adherents themselves come to view the primary reasons as illusory, for example because they cease to believe in the god at the center of the tradition, and so cease to believe in the values that would have provided primary reasons for many of their actions, such as ritual sacrifices or prayers.

Interestingly, even in that situation, it may remain possible to adhere to a tradition and enjoy the benefits Scheffler describes, and so to continue having the traditional reasons. But this can happen only with greater self-consciousness about these benefits and secondary reasons than believing adherents typically have. If I've stopped believing in the god at the heart of my tradition, and so can no longer take myself to have the same reason to perform certain honoring or appeasing duties that I once took myself to have, I can continue on with it *only* insofar as I see the secondary value in the benefits of adhering to the tradition—expressing loyalty to my ancestors, respect for their struggles, solidarity with them, and so on.

This is just the situation faced by many contemporary adherents of religious traditions, who continue with ritual prayers and observances with a view explicitly to the traditional reasons Scheffler describes—for themselves, their children and their communities. It bears emphasis, however, that *these reasons* are profoundly different from the reasons their forebears took themselves to have for the same activities, without which the very traditions in question would never have developed as they did. For a tradition so centered on a god that its daily prayers, food laws, rites of passage, calendar and sense of place and identity in world history all revolve around this god, the dropping of belief in that god is hardly a peripheral matter, like shifting from blood sacrifices to symbolic ones. It radically changes its adherents' understanding of why they're doing what they're doing, again in a direction of explicit awareness of the benefits of tradition as the real point of the activity.

The fact that these benefits can remain, despite such a deep shift in adherents' self-understanding within the tradition, shows just how robust these reasons of tradition can be. At the same time, however, there will also be tensions and struggles in this sort of case. One might worry about *authenticity* in participating in traditions of prayer, for example, without belief in the god to whom they are addressed. To recite ancient prayers with no belief in the addressee is not the same activity as praying, and this raises questions about the extent to which a tradition *can* really be upheld after such radical shifts in belief. There is at least some difficulty in seeking to honor a tradition through activities that are fundamentally different from those performed by the shapers of the tradition, and for reasons that are so different from the primary reasons they took themselves to have, which invested the tradition with its distinctive meaning in the first place.¹ And even where the activity remains the same, as in reciting stories expressive of the self-understanding and values of the tradition, there will be difficulties feeling authentic when this content clashes with one's own understanding and values.

In my own case, discomfort over a sense of inauthenticity in reciting prayers I didn't believe in or creeds I found partly offensive was decisive, and it was not possible for me to maintain adherence to the Roman Catholic tradition in which I grew up, despite the benefits it might still have provided. But there are obviously many for whom the decision tips the other way. This seems especially so in cases where there is a much richer focus on the cultural history of a people

¹ There are more general questions here about what counts as performing the same activities. Which more closely counts as "doing as Socrates did": dressing in a toga and seeking definitions of terms, or dressing in contemporary clothes (e.g., blue jeans) and seeking truth in whatever way seems best to one (which may differ significantly from Socratic methods)? Insofar as the former falls under the description "imitating the ways of a long-dead philosopher," it is *not* at all what Socrates himself did or understood himself to be doing. The best ways of carrying on a tradition may sometimes have less to do with replicating historical details and more to do with finding *the relevant current analogues of what mattered to the makers of the tradition*, if this is possible. Which way this goes in different cases is an interesting and difficult matter, depending on one's purposes in adhering to the tradition.

to provide the benefits of tradition, as in Conservative Judaism, which contrasts with the culturally thinner, doctrinally-based focus of my former tradition.

In any case, my earlier point was that the benefits of adherence to a tradition don't generally depend on the reality of the alleged primary reasons behind its activities.² And one reason this is important is that it means that although people in a pluralistic society will disagree profoundly about those primary reasons—for example, because they disagree about what God demands of us, or whether there is a god at all—we can still agree on the genuine benefits traditions may provide their adherents. This ties in to the points about normative diversity and political morality at the end of the paper. A liberal society will accommodate the normative diversity embodied by various traditions, respecting the fact that whether or not the primary reasons that drive their activities are genuine, there will at least often be benefits and related reasons that are real and importantly related to human flourishing. Disagreement over the primary reasons and values is no obstacle to this.

Having said that, however, it's equally important not to overextend the point (not that Scheffler himself does). I began by considering appeals to tradition in the context of political *clashes* between traditionalists and non-traditionalists seeking certain forms of liberty and recognition.

The points Scheffler has made support the view that traditions can be normative for their adherents, so that there should be spheres of protection for many traditions, within which adherents can pursue lives responsive to the range of reasons provided by their traditions. We

² It is a further and more difficult question whether the *reason-giving force* of those benefits is at least sometimes so dependent. Someone might claim that it always is, i.e., that although a group may enjoy benefits from adhering to a tradition, those benefits fail to provide them with genuine reasons for adhering if the tradition embodies false beliefs or values. This seems much too strong, though perhaps there are some kinds of egregious evaluative error that would undermine or 'silence' the reason-giving force of any such benefits (rather than merely providing countervailing reasons against adherence to the tradition, which would have to be weighed against the reasons provided by the benefits).

can accept all of this, however, without granting that traditions are normative in any further sense that would imply that they somehow provide irreducible reasons even for those who no longer wish to adhere to those traditions. When it comes to addressing conflicts in the “culture wars,” where traditionalists make claims to support policies binding on everyone, I think the reductive dilemma is actually more or less correct: traditions offer nothing *in this context* beyond the values they point to, and if those primary claims of value are false, then that’s the end of the matter.³ Scheffler’s insight, as I see it, is that this shouldn’t blind us to the ways in which traditions can nonetheless sometimes be normative *for their own adherents*, providing reasons that are neither reducible to the reasons grounded in their values, nor generally dependent on the soundness of those values.

³ While the last part of this claim seems clear to me, the first part may be a bit overstated. Consider a conflict in which a traditional value V is superior to a proposed revisionist value R, so that the traditional claim is favored over the opposing revisionist one. Is the reason for maintaining the traditional arrangement exhausted by this superiority of V to R? Perhaps not. Suppose one society starts with arrangements based on V and is debating whether to switch to arrangements based on R, while another society is in the opposite situation. It may be that while the superiority of V to R both gives the first society a reason to maintain their current arrangements and gives the second society a reason to switch to arrangements based on V, there is nonetheless *additional* reason for the first society, based on the fact that it already has an established tradition of arrangements based on V. If so, then the above remark about traditions contributing nothing, in the context of conflict, other than the values they point to, would need to be qualified to allow for this extra normativity in cases where the traditional values are in fact superior. This would not, however, affect the point that traditions have no normative force, in the context of conflict, when their underlying values are unfounded.